

News and Information

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**Contact:
David McCollum
Chris Allen**

**Weekly Column by David McCollum, Director
Tennessee Division of Consumer Affairs
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More Speed, More Risk

In the beginning, dial-up Internet access from your home computer was either a luxury or toy. Today, it seems almost everyone is on-line, and the service feels more like a need than a want. Now, Direct Subscriber Lines (DSL) and cable Internet service are beginning to replace dial-ups because they offer radically faster service. With that speed comes risk, so you should take steps to protect your computer.

With DSL or cable, your computer is connected to the Internet anytime it is on. This means you do not have to wait for a connection. It also means that your computer may become target for computer hackers. Because there is a connection, hackers have a path which can be used to take control of your computer and/or plant viruses on it.

Computer viruses come in many varieties. They can be relatively harmless, changing your background color or the font in your word processing software. They can also be very harmful, causing your computer to crash and destroying all of your files.

Some programs, nicknamed "trojans" after the legendary Trojan horse, give hackers the ability to secretly use your computer to hack into or otherwise damage larger computers or networks. Web sites are often shut down because hackers create a network of home computers which overload the site with useless data, in what is known as a "denial-of-service attack." Legitimate businesses spend a great deal of time and money protecting themselves from these attacks.

The most effective way of protecting your computer from hackers is to install a firewall. A firewall is a piece of software which blocks the paths (called "ports") that a hacker can use to access your computer. There are a number of firewall products and virus scanners available today, so you should speak to your Internet service provider about which ones will be right for you. Some good ones are even available free of charge. Be sure you have a firewall in place *before* you activate DSL or cable Internet service.

If you have questions or concerns regarding Internet services or any other consumer issue, contact the Tennessee Division of Consumer Affairs at 1-800-342-8385 or visit www.state.tn.us/consumer.